THE GOD WHO CREATES
October 17, 2010

John Buchanan
Pastor

Psalm 96
Genesis 1:1–27, 31
Matthew 6:25–29

“In the beginning when God created the heavens and earth . . .”
Genesis 1:1 (NRSV)

What, in the earth world,
is there not to be amazed by
and to be steadied by
and to cherish?
Oh, my dear heart . . .
look at the world.
Behold the morning glory,
the meanest flower,
the ragweed,
the thistle.
Look at the grass.

Mary Oliver
“The Singular and Cheerful Life”
Evidence

In these spectacular October days, as seasons change
and earth prepares to sleep and be renewed,
we cannot help but lift our hearts in adoration and praise.
So we come here this morning, with gratitude,
with trust, with hope, eager to hear the word you have for us.
Startle us, O God with your truth,
in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I was mesmerized on Wednesday evening by the television coverage of Chilean miners emerging one by one from their captivity 2,300 feet below the surface of the earth. There they were, after almost ten weeks in a hot, humid, confined space deep in the bowels of the earth that must have seemed like hell itself, for seventeen days without contact, without any assurance that anyone knew where they were—or that they were still alive,

for that matter. There they were, smiling, embracing the rescue crew, their dear ones, the president of Chile. It was, I thought, an inspiring testimony to the human spirit, the resiliency and courage, the life force in us that refuses to be dismissed, forgotten, defeated. There was one striking image in particular: the miner who emerged from the capsule, fell to his knees, and remained on his knees, silently, for some time.

What was he doing? What did that mean? What is it about us that does that sort of thing? Someone said—I forget who—that one of the best reasons for believing in God is that you have to have someone to thank. So that, I assume, is what he was doing: expressing gratitude to God, in whatever words he had and certainly in his eloquent physical gesture, that he was alive, that there is still earth and sky and water and food and human love. My guess is that he, all of them, feel something akin to rebirth, as if they have been born again, given everything all over again, literally been raised from death to life.

Sometimes it takes a near disaster to prompt us, but what is it about us that must say thank you, that experiences a depth and wonder at the sheer miracle of life?

Karen Armstrong, British scholar of religion says, “Religion is not something tacked on to the human condition, an optional extra imposed on people by unscrupulous priests. The desire to cultivate a sense of the transcendent may be *the* defining human characteristic” (*The Case for God*, p. 9).

Armstrong has written a big and important and not-for-light-bedtime-reading book entitled *The Case for God.* In the introduction, she pokes gentle fun at herself: “‘That book was really hard,’ readers have told me reproachfully, shaking their heads in faint reproof. ‘Of course it was!’ I want to reply. ‘It was about God.’”

She has written her book in response to a surprising recent national conversation about God, the basic question, in fact: Does God exist? I read last Sunday from a list of questions submitted to John Vest, our Youth Ministry pastor, by eighth grade members of this year’s Confirmation class.

Why does God let bad things like child abuse happen?
Where is God during natural disasters?
Has God been around forever? Will he be around forever?
Where is God?
What is God’s purpose?
Does God really exist?

They are great questions, questions I believe most people ask all their lives. Recent popular best-selling books argue for atheism, that there is no God:

Christopher Hitchens' *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything,* Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, and Sam Harris's *The End of Faith*. Harris defines faith as believing something without evidence and concludes that the results are tragic and dangerous: "We must stop believing in anything that cannot be verified by science. Faith is the root of all evil. It is not enough to get rid of extremists, fundamentalists, terrorists. 'Moderate' believers are equally guilty of the inherently dangerous crime of faith." Harris thinks that we have to get rid of the idea of tolerance—a thought that sounds a lot like a new kind of fundamentalism. It's exactly what extremist Muslims, Jews, and Christians say. Tolerance is not a virtue; it's weakness. It's evil, according to Harris and Osama bin Laden and Fred Phelps, whose church pickets funerals of American servicemen and servicewomen simply because America tolerates homosexuality (Armstrong, p.305).

And so I'm preaching a series of sermons this autumn on what the Bible says and what we believe about God. This morning*, The God Who Creates*.

Karen Armstrong's survey of the history of human religion, religious ritual, religious thinking, begins with a striking description of the ancient cave paintings in Lascaux, France, paintings sixty-five feet underground. There are hundreds of drawings: a powerful bellowing black stag, a leaping cow, a procession of horses, a frieze of elegant deer that appear to be swimming. There are 300 such caves in southern France and northern Spain, painted between 17,000 and 30,000 B.C.E. Archeologists and historians are not sure exactly what to make of them. The consensus is that they were used in some religious ritual, and everybody marvels at what an enormous investment of time and effort they represent—nonproductive labor at a time when starvation was always just a day or two away. From a utilitarian point of view, the creation and maintenance of these caves was a monumental waste of time. Armstrong thinks a clue to their meaning is that they express "an intensely aesthetic appreciation of the natural world." Human beings, from the beginning, have experienced wonder at nature and feelings of reverence (p. 4).

Apparently religion and religious questions are not only deep in us, but from the very beginning they have been part of what it means to be human. And the heart of it has always been our relationship to the world around us: the majesty, terror, mystery, and beauty of nature.

Science, in the meantime, in recent centuries, developed a method to approach and understand the world around us—the scientific method: observe, analyze, weigh, measure, experiment, verify. Truth is whatever makes it through that system. Whatever does not fit, does not submit to rational analysis, is not real. The scientific method is a very important milestone in human civilization: it eliminated a lot of dangerous assumptions—that bleeding was a good way to heal sick people, for

instance. But it had difficulty with complex human experience—for instance, by asserting that the mystery of falling in love is not a mystery at all but merely hormones calling to hormones. The amazing human capacity for self-sacrifice, all the way from a mother's selfless living for her children to a soldier falling on a grenade to save his buddies, has nothing to do with love, according to the scientific method, but is the impulse in our DNA to preserve and advance the human race. Now not all scientists think like that, but some do. There is no reality other than what you can see, feel, touch, smell, weigh, measure, and analyze. There is no room here for God, or rather, the only place in this system for God is as the originator, the first cause, the one who put the universe in motion but has been absent ever since. Some scientists reject that idea as well. Stephen Hawking, distinguished mathematician and physicist—some think the most brilliant person alive today—recently announced that there is no need for God at all: the laws by which nature operates are self-perpetuating and self-generating. He stated that in his new book, *The Grand Design,* and theologians have been quick to criticize Hawking's method and conclusions. (Some book reviews have been witty. For instance, "Stephen Hawking to God: 'Your Services Are No Longer Needed'; God to Hawking: 'You So Don't Get Who I AM!'" (Colin Bossen, *Sightings,* 23 September 2010).

There has always been a counterargument that science and religion are not in conflict but simply are about different realities. German theologian Rudolf Otto wrote a groundbreaking book in 1923, *The Idea of the Holy,* that argued that there is reality experienced by all human beings that transcends human understanding and there are human experiences that do not fit into the scientific method. He called it the "Mysterium Tremendum," and in a famous definition he described it as "it may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of—whom or what? In the presence of that which is a mystery inexpressible and above all creatures" (p.13).

What I find fascinating are scientists who not only think like that—allowing for reality that does not fit or submit to scientific analysis—but find science itself to be a pathway to God. Paul Davies, for instance, mathematical physicist at Cambridge University, wrote, "Through my scientific work, I have come to believe more and more strongly that the physical universe is put together with an ingenuity so astonishing that I cannot accept it as brute fact. . . . It takes more of a leap of faith to believe in a universe without purpose than one with a purpose" (*The Mind of God*).

There are mathematical physicists like John Polkinghorne, former President of Queens College Cambridge and Anglican priest, who observed, "Not only is the universe rationally transparent, it also turns out to be rationally beautiful. . . . A frequent and rewarding scientific experience is that of wonder at the beautiful pattern of order revealed to our inquiry. . . .[It] is

surely too remarkable to be treated as just a happy accident. . . . Belief in God can make all this intelligible" (*Questions of Truth,* p. 12).

Polkinghorne elaborates: "The universe started in an extremely simple way. Following the Big Bang it was just an expanding ball of energy. Now, after 13.7 billion years it is rich and complex, the home of saints and scientists. That fact in itself might suggest that something significant has been going on in cosmic history. . . . It is far too intellectually lazy just to say it was a happy accident" (*Questions of Truth,* p.12).

Albert Einstein put that position succinctly: "Science without religion is lame. Religion without science is blind."

The Bible nowhere argues for the existence of God. You will not find proofs in the Bible that there is a God. What the Bible does is tell stories about human beings in relationship to God. Even the biblical story of creation, in the first chapters of the first book in the Bible, the book of Genesis, has a human story as a backdrop.

"In the beginning, when God created . . ." Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says that those are among the most important and most misunderstood words in the Bible. Walter says, "We are so familiar with the words that we have reduced them to clichés. But we should not miss the bold intellectual effort that is offered here, nor the believing passion" (*Interpretation: Genesis,* p.13)

Many of us were brought up to read the Genesis story—stories actually, because there are two of them—literally, as a historical account of how things happened, the waters of primal chaos, the wind separating the waters, dry land, sun, moon, and the creatures created one by one, until finally human beings are created, male and female, all in six days. When the story ran head on into what we learned in science class, we had a crisis. Some resolved it by ignoring science. It is not easy to do but some people, a lot of people actually, read the Bible literally, as historically, biologically, geographically, factually true. When science seems to challenge what the Bible says about God creating in six days, with the suggestion that it all began with a Big Bang 13.7 billion years ago and that life has been evolving since, science must be wrong and is rejected. And that's fine until people who believe that way get elected to public school boards and start to dictate the content of the science curriculum. Then things don't go very well, and public education has a very real problem.

Other people resolve the problem by dismissing the biblical accounts as simply a myth, not unlike Jack and the beanstalk.

The account is neither history nor myth. It is an affirmation of faith. It is a kind of theological creed. It was written when the people of God were in exile, captives of a powerful nation that apparently wanted to exterminate them, or at least assimilate them, so that they would disappear, not unlike other genocidal efforts to eliminate those same people. It was a dark and dangerous and depressing time. And the questions people were asking were, Why are we in such trouble? How are we going to survive? Does anybody even care? Were all those wonderful stories our parents told us about God calling our people and leading them through the wilderness, was it all simply a myth with no truth to it? Is there any sense to be made of this? Does God even care about us? Does God exist?

That God created—that God creates; that God is sovereign, not the emperor; that God is ultimately powerful, not the enemy army; that God will not abandon us or forget us—that is what this story promises. God is always present in the creation. The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the psalmist affirmed.

And so creation responds to God's goodness and gracious presence:

"Let the heavens be glad and
let earth rejoice," we say together.
Let the sea roar; let the fields exult.
Then shall the trees shout for joy.

It is a deep and powerful and profound statement of faith and trust in a God who is present in the world, who will never abandon the world, who will continue to create the world.

We are Christians because we believe that about God and God's world. And because we believe God came into the world, came to us in a man who lived in the world as we do; God came in a man who experienced life, the world, his family and community and nature, experienced his own self, his own body; a man who loved to walk along the seashore, loved to walk along dusty roads and grassy hillsides of Galilee; a man who loved his life in the world, loved his friends, loved to eat and drink and laugh with them; a man who died the death every human being dies; a man who wondered where God was when he cried out from his cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" God with us.

One day when his friends were worrying about what was to become of them, he said the most remarkable thing:

Stop worrying.
Look at the birds of the air:
they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns,

yet your heavenly Father feeds them.
Stop worrying.
Consider the lilies of the field,
how they grow, they neither toil nor spin,
yet I tell you Solomon in all his glory
was not clothed like one of these.

When his friends wondered what was to become of them—when they were asking the same questions our eighth graders asked, the same questions about life and purpose and meaning you and I ask—Jesus did not launch into a philosophic lecture or preach a sermon or pull out five proofs that God exists. He said, "Look, look around you, behold. Consider the lilies."

"God," British scholar Terry Eagelton said in a lecture at Yale recently, is "not a mega manufacturer . . . not an engineer, but an artist who made the world simply for the love and delight of it" (*Reason, Faith, Revelations,* pp. 7–8).

The artists and musicians and poets teach us: Van Gogh's glorious sunflowers, a magnificent symphony, Mary Oliver in a book of poems she titled *Evidence*…

I must close my eyes
to take it in,
to bear such generosity.

look at the world
Behold.
(*Evidence,* p.17)

After all these years, I heard an owl recently. It was dark. The sound came out of the woods, from what distance I could not tell. I stood silently in the darkness. It came again, several times. I cannot analyze the experience; I can't begin to describe it. All I know is that it was a holy moment, as was the moment I first held a newborn, watched my fifth child come into the world, or stood by a bedside when life slipped away, or driving through the glorious colors of maples and elms and locusts one early morning last week and over the radio, unbidden, uninvited, came Ralph Vaughn Williams' Old Hundredth, with organ, brass and choir.

All people that on earth do dwell
Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice
Him serve with mirth. His praise forth tell,
Come ye before him and rejoice.

Does God exist?
What is to happen to us?
Does anybody care?

Listen to Jesus—go outside and look around.

Thanks be to God.